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SKETCH
OF
THE WYOMING
Historical and Geological Society,

OF WILKES-BARRE,

By C. BEN JOHNSON.

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SKETCH OF THE WYOMING HISTORICAL & GEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

I am neither poet, novelist, nor historian. I never, indeed, experienced even the faintest tinge of an anxiety to be possessed of the divine afflatus, until recently I saw it announced, though on no better authority than that of a vagrant newspaper paragraph, that a poet turns everything he touches into gold. I need gold, as most all mortals do, and though subsequent reflection has convinced me that that which comes from the crucible of the Pegassi is of the sort that feeds the soul, rather than ministers to the vulgar senses, I must confess that I was at first strongly tempted to wish myself a genius at versification. The thought that the capacity of imagining exciting incident and situation and clothing them in a garb of verbiage attractive to the love lorn or the hero worshipping, or of ferretting out previously undiscovered historical facts and links, and giving them pleasing recital, might possibly be useful to me, or, in me, to others, never once entered this empty cranium of mine, until I unexpectedly found my name in the list of promised contributors to a holiday edition of a popular journal. Thus announced and thus deficient, I was in a most perplexing dilemma. What to write I knew not. I dared not venture into the, to me, stranger-realms of poesy, or fiction, or history; and what was there left? I pondered, wishing to be obliging at this glad season, and pondered seriously. Finally I thought me that our local writers have, rather unaccountably, left practically unexplored a most inviting field of local enquiry and examination, and that by making some amends for their remissness in this regard, I might acquit myself of a most useful and interesting paper, and that, too, without transcending the modest role of the reporter.

The Wyoming Historical and Geological Society of Wilkes-Barre, its history, its valuable collections of books, manuscripts, mineralogical and other specimens, and relics of by-gone times appropriate to its purposes, provide the neglected topic to which I have reference; and if, in treating it, I shall succeed in awakening an increased interest in

its affairs, I feel that I shall have accomplished a good turn for, given a suitable and valuable holiday present to, the society, the reader and the community generally.

The Wyoming Historical Society (it did not become specifically geological until later on,) had its origin in a meeting of gentlemen, held February 11th, 1858, at the "Old Fell Tavern," in this city.

The immediate purpose of the gathering was the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of what was then supposed and generally admitted to be the first successful burning of Anthracite coal in an open grate, the achievement of Judge Jesse Fell, in the very tavern in which the meeting was held. Anthracite had previously been used mainly in blacksmiths' furnaces, and was already in active demand for that purpose. Lately, letters and documents have been resurrected, which seem to show that others had burned it in grates before Judge Fell did. Nevertheless the discovery was original with him, though he may not have been the first to make it, while it is quite certain that the news of the success of his experiment was the first to reach the ears of the great public and did more, therefore, than all his predecessors had accomplished, towards securing for our great staple a foothold in the markets of the country as a domestic fuel. It was for that reason eminently fitting that the event should be celebrated here where so much is owing to the discovery, and fitting also that in that celebration an institution designed to preserve to future generations the records of all events interesting in the history of the valley, should have had its birth.

Captain James P. Dennis, a grandson of Judge Fell, was called to the chair, and Wm. P. Miner, the son of the historian, was chosen secretary. To Gen. E. L. Dineen was assigned the duty of explaining the purposes of the meeting, which he did with the grace and eloquence natural to him. But the General did more, for he it was who suggested, there and then, the formation of the Historical Society. The suggestion met with the



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instant hearty endorsement of all present, whereupon a committee was appointed to draft appropriate resolutions. The committee consisted of Gen. E. L. Dana, Judge Woodward, Henry M. Hoyt, Byron Nicholson, Caleb E. Wright, W. H. Beaumont and Col. Samuel Bowman. After a brief recess they reported a preamble in which it was declared to be a duty owing to those yet to come "to preserve and to transmit" to them "recollections of important events, of discoveries and discoverers in science and the useful arts," and resolutions reciting the fact that there were many "memorials, papers and records" of great historical value held by private families and individuals in the valley, which were liable to be mislaid or destroyed if not more zealously looked after, and declaring the feasibility and advisability of the organization of a society to collect and preserve them. The resolutions were adopted unanimously and a committee of five was appointed to draft a Constitution and By-Laws for the government of the society. This committee consisted of Gen. Dana, Dr. Dennis, Caleb E. Wright, John B. Conyngham and Wm. P. Miner.

After remarks by John Howarth on the coals of Wales, Gen. Winchester on our own carboniferous formations, and others on other topics, the meeting adjourned.

The constitution committee's report was submitted at the next meeting, held March 11th, and was adopted, with but few amendments. This meeting was also held at the "Old Fell House."

The next subsequent meeting was convened at what was known as Institute Hall, on the 16th of the same month, and the following gentlemen were elected members:

Hon. Chas. Miner, G. M. Hollenback, Wm. S. Ross, Lord Butler, John N. Conyngham, John L. Butler, Major A. Hamilton Bowman, Sharp D. Lewis, Chas. B. Drake, V. L. Maxwell, Ziba Bennett, Chas. Bennett, Chas. Denison, C. D. Shoemaker, Rev. R. Nelson, Samuel Hoyt, Jno. Bennett, Rev. Thos. P. Hunt, Rev. Jno. Dorrance, Rev. Geo. D. Miles, Wm. C. Reynolds, Henderson Gaylord, Alexander Gray, Thos. F. Atherton, H. S. Butler, Geo. W. Scranton, Samuel G. Turner, Thos. Oldershaw, A. C. Luning, W. H. Alexander, J. J. Locum, Dr. Wm. Brislin, W. W. Ketcham, Chas. A. Lane, Hiram Denison, Dr. Thomas W. Miner, Dr. John Smith, and O. B. Hillard, (all of whom have since passed away into another world), and I. S. Osterhout, Henry Colt, Steuben Jenkins, H. B. Wright, Chas. Parrish, Chas. Dorrance, C. T. Barnum, Calvin Parsons, Sylvester Dana, E. W. Sturdevant, A. T. McChintock,

W. G. Sterling, Joseph Archbald, Joel Bowkley, Lewis Jones jr., O. C. Gritman, Wm. R. Maffit, Jno. Howarth, Jno. C. Beaumont, Rev. Jno. J. Pearce, Jameson Harvey, Nathaniel Rutter, Payne Pettebone, Theodore Strong, Wm. B. Reading, Chas. I. A. Chapman, Ario Pardee, Wm. Tompkins, Alfred Lawton, W. W. Loomis, Jno. Reichard E. S. Goodrich and James Clarkson.

The permanent officers of the society were then chosen as follows: President, E. L. Dana; Vice President, Dr. Chas. F. Ingham; corresponding secretary, Wm. P. Miner; Recording secretary, Geo. H. Butler; Librarian Dr. W. F. Dennis; Recorder, Jao. B. Conyngham; Committee on finance, W. Lee jr., J. P. Dennis, Stewart Pearce; Committee on Publication, C. E. Wright, S. Woodward, C. D. Shoemaker; Committee on Library and Cabinet, H. M. Hoyt, Dr. Chas. F. Ingham, and V. L. Maxwell.

In these lists of the founders and earlier members of the Historical Society are many names deservedly honored in law, in medicine, in politics, in war, in trade, in almost every field of human usefulness, and which will, without doubt, live to be revered in the memories of the people of this valley through all the generations to come. Brought into being, and cradled and nourished by such sponsors, it were strange had the society not grown, and flourished, too, despite the many discouragements with which it has had to contend. What these discouragements have been will, perhaps, never be known, excepting to those whose shoulders have mainly borne the society through them. How it has flourished, what it has achieved, are revealed almost every day to some one who comes for the first time to examine its precious stores, and leaves them in utter astonishment at having learned that he has been living all these years within a stone's throw and yet in utter ignorance of them and of the absorbing interest and great value which attach to them.

On the 22d day of April, 1858, the Ladies Monumental Association met and transferred the Wyoming monument, and the surplus of the funds collected to erect it to the Historical Society. The ground on which the monument stands was regularly deeded to the society, which is obligated, of course, to keep it in repair. The money which came with the donation of the structure amounted to something less than \$300. This money and more has been expended in enclosing the monument and beautifying the grounds about it.

On May 3d, following, the society moved into the building on Franklin street, in which it is yet located, taking a long room on the

second floor. This room it occupied for twenty years, despite the fact that as early as the first annual meeting, which was held February 11, 1859, Dr. Dennis, the curator, reported that the society's collection had already increased to a size and importance too great to permit of its being properly displayed therein.

An act of incorporation was secured on the 10th of May, 1858, and in August following the society organized under it, continuing the officers as above. In November Gen. Ross presented to the society what was known as the Chambers' collection. This collection consisted of some 10,000 specimens in mineralogy, in coins, and in Indian and other curiosities, gathered, during a persistent search of many years, by Harmon A. Chambers, a resident of the upper end of the county. This collection cost Gen. Ross \$2,500.

In 1862 an effort was made to procure for the use of the society the old Odd Fellows' Hall, but it was unsuccessful. Subsequently equally futile efforts were entered upon to induce the building of a second story to the Laning Row of offices on Franklin street, and then to secure the attic, now third story, of the county Court House.

Following close upon the heels of these failures to procure larger and more eligible rooms, certain of the members attempted to bring about the practical disbandment of the society by urging a resolution to donate one-half of the collection to the Lehigh University, and the other half to Lafayette College. Both these institutions are understood to have been anxious for the success of this move, but the local pride of a number of members, theretofore negligent of the society, was aroused by that possibility, and the movement came to naught. In 1870 the Legislature passed an act donating to the society a lot on the old grave yard site, 30x108 feet, fronting on Washington street, and the city added 70 feet to the donation, on the condition that the society should build within two years. Spurred by these gifts, an earnest effort was made the year following to raise the \$40,000, which, it had been estimated, would be the cost of a suitable structure. The late Judge Conyngham was the moving and active spirit in the attempt, and there is a general belief that the money would have been gotten, had not the dread messenger, death, shortly afterward summoned the eminent jurist whence he then passed, full of years and honors.

In 1872 the practice of throwing open the rooms to the public every Friday evening, which has continuously obtained ever since, was agreed upon. The disposition was to keep them open every day and every night,

but the society was not in funds sufficient to employ a fit person to look after them and to provide the necessary fuel and light. The heart was willing, but the purse was empty. And here a remarkable fact comes in to be told. The opening of the rooms for the public's inspection was liberally advertised, but the public came not—that is the grown-up public. The boys, the busy little fellows who labor every day for a few pence in the coal breakers, preparing themselves there for a life amid the noxious vapors and beneath the treacherous roofs of the mines, on the other hand, came in legions. A record kept shows that during the winter of 1878-79 upward of 1200 boys, mostly all coal cracker gamins, availed themselves of the society's gratuitous, interesting entertainment; and I am assured that many of them came in a teachable mood and carried away with them considerable additions to their several stocks of useful knowledge. This manifestation of desire, on the part of our youth, for a greater insight into those matters which come within the purview of the Historical Society's purposes, is a promising indication which it will pay all who can afford it to encourage by liberal donations to the society. The better educated the many poor, the safer the few rich, the grander and nobler the whole social fabric, and the firmer the foundation of the political structure.

In 1878, just previous to the Wyoming Centennial celebration, the collections of the society were removed up stairs in the same building, into the old Odd Fellows' Hall, where, it was supposed, there would be ample accommodations for years to come; but within the last two years the additions have been so numerous as to demand still more space, and another room on the second floor has been rented and fitted up as an office, meeting room and library.

Thus much for the history of the society. I could here incorporate many additional details, and make the story much more complete without giving excuse for any flagging of interest, but I am not allotted columns enough. The society is now very nearly out of debt and, generally speaking, in a condition much more satisfactory than for a number of years past. The war hurt it. A goodly number of those who had become its most assiduous members answered their country's call to arms and the interest of the others was meanwhile monopolized by the more pressing fact of the unfortunate and bloody conflict.

Within a few years, however, the society has realized an infusion of young blood and under that influence has since gone steadily

and prosperously onward. The present roll of membership is large and the officers are as follows:

President, John Wells Hollenback; Vice-Presidents, W. H. Sturdevant, Hon. Chas. A. Miner, Dr. E. R. Mayer, Dr. J. A. Murphy; Treasurer, Sheldon Reynolds; Recording Secretary, Harrison Wright; Corresponding Secretary, Douglas Smith.

I can give but a feeble description of the collections of the society. To intelligently and fully describe them would require, not a column or two, but a newspaper or two. A mere reference to some of the more important of them must suffice for the purposes of this article, a perusal of which, the reader is invited to remember, can be supplemented by a personal examination of the collections themselves, any Friday evening, on which he is otherwise disengaged, between 7:30 and 10 o'clock.

In numismatics there is a collection of some 7,000 coins. These include a complete set of all the American pennies and a nearly complete set of all other American coins. Then there are numerous specimens of the colonial coinage, Roman coins from as far back as 300 years B. C., a nearly complete set of the coins of the Caesars beginning with those issued during the reign of Julius Caesar, Greek coins, Jewish shekels, coins, in short, from all the countries of the world. Among those of Roman mintage are several specimens that, until a very few years ago, could not be duplicated anywhere in America, and were, therefore, very valuable. Then there are quantities of scrip, continental and confederate currency, and other descriptions of paper issues. To this collection additions are being constantly made, and very large and exceptionally important contributions are promised for the early future.

The historical collection and museum of antiquities and curiosities, is one of the most attractive and interesting features of the accumulation. This includes relics from the Wyoming Battle field, of Sullivan's famous march against the Indians and nearly every other important event in both the earlier and later history of the valley.

The collection of the society in what has come to be known as Egyptology is small as yet but very unique and of much worth. It consists in part of mummified relics, a wooden figure said to be 6000 years old, and a well preserved specimen of Egyptian papyri, dating back 4700 years, which is worth its weight in gold. The society has had its contents partially translated. Most of these articles are from Peele's old Philadelphia museum, where the good people of the Quaker City

were wont to indulge their wonder seventy or eighty years ago.

The Indian collection, which is constantly increasing, is one of the most complete and valuable in the country. Some years ago one of the Regents of the Smithsonian Institute said to a member of the Wyoming Society, to whom he had been introduced in Washington: "I hear that your society has a magnificent Indian collection. Could you not get it for us?" "I am afraid not," was the answer. "We could have plaster casts made of the articles for your society, and they would be worth as much as the originals, you know." "That being your opinion," came the prompt response, "suppose you have the plaster casts made for yourselves."

The conchological collection is very extensive. There are a number of duplicates contained in it which it is the intention of the society to use for completing the collection by exchanging with other organizations in the same field of research.

Of minerals there are some 2000 specimens gathered from every quarter of the globe. Perhaps the feature of greatest local interest and value in this collection is a set of specimens of coal from every country where coal is mined, including Japan and Greenland.

Geology is represented by a case of specimens of rocks and petrefactions illustrating in their regular order all the varying formations composing the crust of the earth, beginning with the granite or back bone of the vast structure and finishing with those in which the first traces of man were discovered.

Palaeontology treats of fossiliferous remains. In connection with its pursuit of this branch of the natural sciences, the society has acquired one of the finest collections in existence, which has been examined and classified by Professor Leo Lesquereux, the greatest living authority on the subject. In its palaeontological researches the Wyoming society has been of marked service to the scientific world. From discoveries made at Mill Creek under its auspices, Prof. Leslie, the State geologist, will be able to prove in his forthcoming report that the Permian formation does exist in this country, a fact heretofore disputed and resting solely upon the discovery of certain plants supposed to belong to it by professors White and Fontaine, of the second geological survey, in western Pennsylvania. The Wyoming society's laborers found, and procured abundant specimens of the lime-stone and sea shells, constituting evidence beyond the range of dispute.

The botanical collection is not large, though it includes, among other interesting features, a valuable Herbarium, the result of the stu-

dies, and "finds," in Germany, about 100 years ago, of an ancestor of our artist-townsmen, Mr. Eugene C. Frank.

In addition to all these there are many articles in the society's stores, which cannot be classified, and which must be seen to be understood and appreciated at the full of their interest and value.

The library. Many people, particularly editors, are inclined to belittle the value of "Pub. Docs.," by which is meant documents issued free from the government printing office and treating of the doings of the government. It is true, perhaps, that their possession has never made the rural scissors, manipulator a Croesus, no matter how attentive and liberal his "member" may have been in providing them. It is doubtless further the fact that they are ordinarily cast aside by their recipients to find their way ultimately back to the paper mill. Nevertheless, in complete sets, and in substantial library binding, they are, for the purposes of a historical society, and for the purpose of general reference, a real treasure; and so the Wyoming Society regards them. In 1862, through the influence of Col. Wright, then representing this district in Congress, the society was made a regular depository for public documents, and as a result it has upon its shelves a copy of every work issued by the government from the beginning of 1859 up to the present day. They include the records of the doings of Congress, of the Executive departments and of our armies during the war, of the examinations made into the affairs of the late insurrectionary States, of numerous other official investigations like, for instance, that into the Chinese question, and hundreds of other books equally valuable and indispensable to a complete historical record. The agricultural reports go back to 1847, and lately the government has prepared and published in a separate book, a general index to all the subjects treated in them. These subjects cover the entire range of agriculture, stock raising, &c. Any Luzerne farmer, needing information of any kind under this head, will find in the index referred to a guide-board to that which he seeks and, almost without doubt, on the same shelf, the information itself. The patent office reports have been similarly indexed and encouragement to inventors and a spur to invention thus provided. Of these government books there are some 1,200, all neatly and substantially bound, as I have said, and chronologically arranged. They have not been catalogued as yet, but shortly will be. In addition, the library contains some 2,000 other volumes, mostly scientific and historical works, many of them very rare and of a proportionate cash and literary value. Every day

some new additions to the book-stock are being made, mostly voluntary contributions or the product of the exchange of duplicates.

It is astonishing that the facts I have thus briefly and imperfectly set forth, especially those having reference to the remarkably valuable and interesting specimens of the Historical Society, have heretofore been known to so few of our citizens. I venture to say that not more than one in five has ever even heard of the existence of the society, while not one in twenty has paid its rooms a visit or in any other way learned aught concerning the numerous treasures it so sedulously gathers and jealously guards. Here is something more than a nucleus, about which could be collected, in a very little time and at comparatively trifling expense, a vast museum of historical mementos and objects in natural science, and a library second only to the best in the State or nation, which together would prove an incalculably valuable school of instruction for our people, old and young. The society's greatest present need is a separate fire-proof building. This secured, contributions would pour in speedily and lavishly, and a careful and spirited management, by economical purchase and exchange, would not be long in achieving even more than the most sanguine have hoped for. I heard two gentlemen recently discussing the possibilities of the society, could the fire-proof building be secured. One of them said that, in the event of the acquirement of such a structure, he would individually add one thousand volumes to the library, and the second pledged himself for a donation of five hundred more. From 10,000 to 20,000 books could without doubt be ultimately secured, with practically little outlay in cash, while the present aggregate of the society's other valuables would be many times multiplied. Secured against the possibility of their loss by fire, hundreds would give rare books and other articles that, without such assurance, they will choose to themselves take the risk of preserving.

Who will suggest a plan whereby the money necessary to rear a fire proof building can be raised? But a few thousand dollars would be required, and all classes, I take it, are or ought to be interested—the rich, because in no other way can they so cheaply provide nutritious food for the minds of the poor, (and their minds should be as much and as constantly an object of solicitude in a country where all men are politically equal, as their stomachs;) the poor, because the value of a good library, open without cost to them and to their children, cannot be measured in dollars and cents, and because the Wyoming Historical and Geological society offers the likeliest, perhaps the only probability of the establishment of such a library in our city.

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